

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year by **pookiestheone**

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Summary:

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The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Author's Note:

Since my summer WIP is languishing, how about some early Christmas

Steve hauled the long-needed pine up two flights of stairs to their apartment. He had sorted through the trees on the lot and found this one; there were better but this was at the price he wanted to pay. It definitely wasn't a Charlie Brown tree but it wasn't like the perfect-looking ones his parents always had. Besides it was Christmas Eve and there wasn't a great selection. He had no idea why they had decided to leave it until Christmas Eve.

Earlier in the year he and Billy had found a large box of Christmas decorations at a flea market while they was looking for some dishes; a mismatched collection of decades-old glass ornaments, some a bit faded, but all surprisingly unbroken. There were over sixty, carefully nested in their original boxes, layers of newspaper protecting them; a haloed angel in a dishevelled gown lay on top. Billy had turned on the charm with the girl working the stall and managed to get them for a fraction of the asking price. She even told him to come back the next week and she would have some strings of lights for him.

Until recently money had been tight most of the time. After rent and food and all the other things that came with living on their own, they seldom had any left over. Things had got better, but they were still careful. In July he had got a promotion and a decent raise at work. In addition to his apprentice mechanic training at the garage Billy had picked up a part time job at the neighbourhood hardware store. It was only a couple of hours two or three nights a week and every other Saturday so it wasn't too bad, but Steve hated it because it meant they didn't have as much time together. Billy just shrugged and said something about "do what ya have to do."

They weren't rolling in money as Steve's choice of tree showed, but they certainly didn't have to worry as much.

This was going to be their second Christmas together away from Hawkins; Steve was determined it was going to be perfect. Or as near to perfect as his bonus of a seventy-five bucks would get it. He didn't plan to spend all of it, but he also wasn't going to scrimp like last year. Turkey for sure, not burgers.

Mrs. Stanley from the second floor gave him her recipes for stuffing and scalloped potatoes.

"Have you ever cooked a turkey?" she asked suspiciously.

"Well... no."

"Oh my."

"I talked to someone at work though and she told me what to do. How to make sure the stuffing doesn't fall out too."

"Good, good." She didn't seem convinced. "Now you have to cut the potatoes real thin. Too many people make them too thick and they don't cook right."

She looked at him and shook her head.

"Never mind. Bring me the potatoes and the onions, I've got everything else, and I'll make it; you'll just have to come pick it up. I bet you don't have a casserole dish anyway."

"I could buy one."

"I thought so. And come get me when you're ready to put that bird in the oven, you hear. I'll make you boys my apple pie too."

"You don't have to do all that."

"I know, dear, but I want to. You two are always doing things for me and when I was so sick last winter I don't know what I would have done without you. Anyway, I miss cooking for more than one now that Martin's gone and Davy's so far away in New York."

Steve knew that if he let her she would do everything and probably try to serve it too. When he asked her to come to dinner she just said

"maybe next year." He didn't like the idea of her being alone all Christmas Day so he insisted that she was going to have coffee and share the pie with them. They would also make sure she went home with some of the leftovers.

But dinner was just a small part of his plan.

Billy had a soft spot for cats. Not German Shepherds or Dobermans which people might think were more likely, but cats. Neil would never let him have one because he was allergic, or said he was. He would stop to pet any cat he saw; he would even cross the street. Mrs. Stanley had two that sometimes sat on the landing and Billy would sit down on the stairs to let them climb all over him. He quickly volunteered to look after them when she was in hospital.

When one of them had kittens in late October Billy was like a big kid and when all but one had been given away he worried about the straggler because "he's the best." But cats cost money and that was something they hadn't had to spare so he never said anything about getting one.

As soon as Steve heard about the kittens he put what he called "Operation Sylvester" into motion. He checked with the neighbourhood vet about fees, scouted out food and litter prices. Once he found that would easily fit into their new budget he gradually put together a starter pack - blanket, toys, collar, dishes, litter box - that he had Mrs. Stanley keep for him. He got a bed too, but suspected this cat would sleep wherever it wanted. And of course the reason Mrs. Stanley still had a kitten was that he had made sure early on it wasn't going anywhere but to Billy.

Steve propped the tree in the corner of their living room. They hadn't got the chair they wanted for there so it was the ideal spot. He stood back and looked at it. *Once the lights and ornaments go on it'll be fine.* As he headed for the kitchen to get some coffee he heard Billy's key in the door.

"You're early. Want coffee?" he asked as it swung open.

"No. I'm good." There was a pause. "You got the tree?"

"Yeah."

"I thought we'd go together tonight."

Oh, shit!

Steve turned around and came back.

"Sorry. I wasn't sure you were going to have the time and it *is* Christmas Eve. Guess I should have asked."

"Yeah, you should have."

Uh-oh!

"We'll decorate it together, though. That's the fun part. And we'll make hot chocolate."

Billy just grunted as he all but threw himself onto the sofa which creaked in protest.

"And when we're done we'll spread out a blanket on the floor in front of it and I'll fuck your brains out."

Billy almost choked on his laugh.

"OK, that just might make up for it."

Steve sat down beside him, pulling him close.

"We'll get the tree together every year from now on. And we won't leave it until Christmas Eve. Promise." He paused. "Anyway, why are you home so early?"

"Manny doesn't need me at the store tonight because his niece is filling in. But," he reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope, "he wanted me to come by so he could give me some cash for Christmas."

"That was nice."

"Yeah, he didn't have to do that, but that's what he's like." Billy kicked off his shoes and flexed his toes. "What are we going to have

for dinner?"

"Why don't we get pizza. You call Maria's and I'll run over and pick it up when it's ready. Beer, pizza and a Christmas tree party followed by hot chocolate. What could be better?"

"Well," Billy replied as he got up, "you did mention something about a blanket and sex."

Steve reached out and swatted his ass.

"Yeah. How could I forget."

While they waited for the pizza they got the tree into its stand and pulled the box of decorations from deep in the back of their hall closet. Billy had bought some garland from Manny so that would go to fill in any bare spots.

Once they got the pizza they started to work. After an hour or so it was ready; it took a bit to get the uncooperative angel straight. They sat on the sofa, feet propped up on the coffee table as Billy ate the last slice of pizza, admiring their handiwork. All that remained was to plug it in.

"Not bad at all," Steve said. "I like that nothing's the same. Mom always has all red and green with clear lights."

Billy dropped the crust into the pizza box as he got up.

"Let's have a look."

The plug was out of the way so he had to get on his hands and knees.

"We need an extension cord. So?"

"Wow!"

Billy got up and stood back.

"Yeah, that looks good."

Steve reached out and grabbed his hand.

"It needs presents. Put yours out while I get mine from Mrs. Stanley's. Don't give me that look. I know how nosey you can be so I'm not leaving anything around here."

When he got back Billy had put three presents under the tree. He recognised the one that Max had sent, but the remaining were for him. One he knew would be a shirt for work, the box was a dead giveaway, but the small one was a mystery.

Billy was just as puzzled. The cartons of cigs he was sure about, but he couldn't guess what was in the box that was about the same size as the one he was giving Steve.

Steve was about to sit down when he stopped.

"Did you pick up the mail?"

"I thought you had."

"No. OK, be right back. Put the kettle on for the hot chocolate."

"Yes, sir."

By the time Steve returned Billy had everything ready, waiting for the water.

"A bill, a flyer for some band and a card." He held up a red envelope.
"From my parents."

"They sent a card? Open it."

"Not sure I want to. Not a word in almost two years and then this."

"Give it to me." Billy tried to snatch it away, but Steve pulled it back in time.

"Hey! Hands off."

"So open the goddam thing," Billy urged as he turned to pour the water into the mugs. He heard the paper tear as he was stirring.
"Well?"

"'Merry Christmas Steven'."

"That's it? No 'Mom and Dad'. No how are you? Write Us? Call us?"

"That and a cheque for five hundred."

"How ... how much?"

"Five hundred."

"Well, fuck me! You're going to cash that." He didn't leave room for discussion.

"Damn right."

As he handed him his mug Billy knew Steve would have been almost as happy with a short note as the money. The line his parents had drawn when they found out about the two of them was still firmly in place. Things had been said by everyone that left still-unhealed wounds, but now at least they hadn't cut off all contact. *Maybe one day.*

"C'mon, pretty boy. Let's drink our hot chocolate and admire the tree. We'll be like that old couple in the park."

"OK, and I'll find some Christmas music on the radio."

"No you're..."

"Yes I am. I heard you humming *Silent Night* when I came in from getting the mail. We're having Christmas music."

When they finished their hot chocolate Steve raised his arm and Billy leant into him.

"You know," he complained half-heartedly as he yawned, "That Andy Williams guy isn't my type of music."

"Never would have guessed." Steve had closed his eyes and really wasn't paying attention.

It was almost seven in the morning when Steve woke to the radio still playing quietly in the background. He was stretched out on his side on the sofa with Billy spooned against him. He tickled his ear.

"Merry Christmas."

"What?" he mumbled groggily.

"It's Christmas Day."

Billy groaned as he sat up.

"Are you telling me that we slept here all night?"

"Yep. Coffee, presents then breakfast?"

They sat cross-legged in front of the tree, mugs of coffee off to one side.

Max's gift was her most recent school photo in a wooden frame with a note.

Just so you don't forget what I look like, shthead.

"Yep, that's Max." Billy put the photo back in its box. He planned on putting it on their dresser. If anyone had told him while he was treating her so badly that he would be pleased she sent him a photo he would have laughed at them.

The next two gifts were what they expected. A blue striped dress shirt for Steve and two cartons of Marlboros for Billy.

He seemed nervous as he handed the small box to Steve.

"Hope you like it."

Steve tore the paper off and opened it; there was an even smaller one inside. It held a silver band with an intricate open design.

He stared at it for a few seconds then looked up.

"The guy said it's a Celtic knot ring. All those loops are supposed to

mean eternity."

"Eternity?"

He took it out and held it up so the lights from the tree could shine through.

"I... Really?"

"Here, give me it."

He took it and grabbed Steve's left hand, sliding it onto his ring finger.

"I guessed at the size but it looks like it fits."

"Perfect."

Steve leant over and kissed him.

"I've never had a better Christmas present." He kissed him again.
"Now, yours."

As he handed him the box he worried that it wasn't right, that it wasn't enough.

Billy pulled out a toy mouse and looked at him for an answer.

"Think about it, hun. Why would I give you a cat toy?"

Steve knew he had made the right choice when he saw the look of realisation on his face.

"You didn't! You got me a cat?"

"The best one. Wait here."

A few minutes later Steve came through the open door of the apartment carrying the box with all the supplies and the kitten perched on top. Billy reached over and gently lifted him off so he could put the box down.

"C'mere you."

He immediately latched onto his shirt and climbed up to push his head against his chin as he stroked his back.

"How long have you been planning this?"

"When did we find out about the kittens?"

Billy stepped forward and kissed him.

"Never thought I'd be lucky enough to find someone like you."

"We're both lucky," Steve said, smiling as he looked at his ring. "All right, I'm hungry. We're having pancakes. You and, uh... 'kitten' open the table and get it ready. What are you going to call him anyway?" he asked as he went into the kitchen.

"Don't know yet."

After the dishes were done they sat on the sofa with a second cup of coffee. The kitten was asleep, spread-eagled on his back, in Billy's lap.

"I'm going to name him Hawkins."

"Why? You hated Hawkins."

"It's where I met you."

Steve rested his head against his shoulder and ran his fingers gently through the soft fur of the kitten's belly.

"We'll call him Hawk though, right?"

"Yeah."

Author's Note:

This is set about 1988.

"Operation Sylvester" is, of course, a nod to Sylvester the Cat. Steve probably would have seen him in TV specials or those commercials rather than have read the Tweety and Sylvester comic books. Although,

maybe he's a secret comic book geek.

And the title is the Christmas song "It's The Most Wonderful Time Of The Year" sung originally by Andy Williams.